

Using Wikis to Collaboratively Prepare for Qualifying Examinations:

An Example of Implementation in an Advanced Graduate Program

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Abstract

This article focuses on the experiences of seven Ph.D. students implementing a wiki to collaboratively prepare for qualifying examinations in the educational technology program at a large southeastern university. Concomitant study for such a rigorous examination is rare, and the trials and tribulations of the group are described in detail. Specific guidelines highlighting effective preparation options for qualifying exams are often elusive, and, as such, this article explores current research related to collaborative preparation and mentoring, as well as the qualifying examination process in total, in hopes of adding to the scientific body of knowledge related to these subjects. It also offers best practice strategies, suggests possible technology tips regarding wiki implementation, and seeks to better scaffold future scholars and/or mentors seeking to effectively participate in or plan for collaborative qualifying examination preparation.

Keywords: *collaboration, graduate education, qualifying exam, Web 2.0, wiki(s)*

The mere mention of the term “qualifying examination” (also referred to as *qualifying exams* or *quals*) intimidates even the most confident graduate students. The process is stressful and requirements are often vague or elusive. In some cases the exam creates so much anxiety that students delay its completion or even avoid it all together and remain ABD (All But Dissertation). In an effort to mitigate anxiety and demystify the process, the educational technology (ed tech) program at the University of Florida initiated a pair of two, semester-long seminar courses

in which doctoral students participated in the qualifying examination process collaboratively under the direction and guidance of key program personnel. Acting as facilitators and guides, these faculty members offered insight into the professional duties students can expect to encounter in academia and/or the business world.

The collaborative effort to collect, synthesize, and share key knowledge in the field of educational technology was a major component of the seminar. The group selected a wiki as the most effective and efficient tool to meet this objective for three reasons. First, the wiki served as a living document to which changes could be tracked through Really Simple Syndication (RSS). This is a process by which participants subscribe to the wiki and receive email notification when another member of the group posts a change or makes a revision. Second, the option to create multiple pages allowed for better organization of general content as well as individual pages for each seminarian to record content relative to his or her specific field of study. This helped bridge the knowledge gaps between participants and afforded insights and connections within the broader field of educational technology that might not have been made otherwise. Third, it was important to the group that research and data collection be conducted in an open forum in

“The students...were encouraged to see the qualifying exam as a collaborative effort, especially to alleviate the feeling of ‘going it alone.’”